WHEN WERE THE MIDDLE AGES?*

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Sometime ago, the Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa published an essay in which he claimed that in Muslim countries the same obscure, rigid and primitive belief still reigns that dominated in Europe during the Middle Ages. Fortunately: "Unlike Muslim societies, which are still deeply religious, Christian societies have undergone a process of secularization—religion has been separated from general culture and political power—which has restricted the church and obliged it to operate within the limits of the legal system . . . Thanks to this important development, which began with the Reformation and reached its climax with the French Revolution, the democratic system has appeared and we can speak about the culture of freedom."[1] In this way, Vargas Llosa formulates what every cultured European, despite a century of historical criticism, still thinks. The Middle Ages were an unfortunate period of a thousand years in which Christianity dominated European culture completely, until in the 16th century the Renaissance and the Reformation set Europeans free to pursue more secular forms of happiness. Apparently Llosa considers this a blessing for mankind, others have considered it a disaster. Whatever the opinions are, one thing is certain: that between 500 and 1500 AD there existed a homogeneous period when religion and society were interwoven, the Middle Ages. Before discussing whether this assessment is correct and whether such a period has ever really existed, it is necessary to investigate where the name and its dubious meaning originate.

There is a tendency, found in many cultures, to divide time into three periods: a golden age followed by a dark middle period that resulted in a return to former glory. Christians in the early Middle Ages were sure that they lived in just such a dark middle period between the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of mankind, a time of

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[1] *NRC Handelsblad*, Monday 5 September 1994, 7.

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shadows, a time of transition and of longing for the end, the time of the Church.[2] When, after 1100 AD the political and economical climate dramatically improved, the middle period became less grim and endless than it had seemed before. It was the Cistercian abbot, Joachim of Fiore, who formulated this change in attitude most succinctly. He distinguished three eras in history, those of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. What is more important than the names is that, according to Joachim, Christianity was right at the end of the Time of the Son and that the Time of the Holy Spirit, when the whole world would change utterly, was about to begin.[3] For my purpose it is important to note that the visions of Joachim, which inspired thousands of people until the 17th century, have essentially contributed to the ever growing hope that the middle period was nearing its end, and that mankind stood at or had already stepped over the threshold of a new time of perfection and glory when hope would give way to fulfilment.

One can clearly see these changes in historical consciousness in the subsequent centuries. The humanists deeply believed that, with their zeal for the restoration of classical Latin, they had forever left behind the middle period by restoring the glory of ancient Rome; they spoke about a rebirth, a Renaissance. The gesture of Petrarch was symbolic: he was crowned a poet-laureate in Rome on the Capitol on Easter Sunday, 1341, twelve hundred years after the last coronation of a poet had taken place. With this grand gesture classical literature was resurrected, the poet looked back at his great predecessors over the abyss of a thousand years.[4] In the sixteenth century, the Reformers were the ones who, with their call for a return to the purity of the first Christian community, contributed to the feeling that mankind had left behind the dark times of primitive superstitions and that it stood on the threshold of a new era, although this was surely not the purpose of such early reformers as Luther and Melanchthon. They still followed the periodization of history according to the scheme of the six world eras and the four world empires.[5] However, that periodization no longer corresponded with the historical consciousness of the time. For now mankind looked back over a long dark period to the old days of true faith and pure literature, which had been happily restored.

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[2] W. von den Steinen, *Der Kosmos des Mittelalters* (Bern and Munich, 1967[2]), 19-20.
[3] M. Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future* (London, 1976), 1-8.
[4] D. Mertens, 'Mittelalterbilder in der Frühen Neuzeit', in: G. Althoff (ed.), *Die Deutschen und ihr Mittelalter* (Darmstadt, 1992), 32-33.
[5] Mertens, 'Mittelalterbilder', 41-5.

It was not until the late 17th century that this feeling was captured in a new periodization of history in which no longer the Bible formed the model but secular history. The Leyden Church historian Georgius Horn (1627-1670) saw the fall of the Roman Empire and the beginning of the Reformation as the two most crucial events in Church history. His viewpoint was applied to the whole of history by Christopher Cellarius (1638-1707) from Halle. He distinguished three historical periods that he, for the first time, gave the now usual names of Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Modern Age, the very names we still use.[6] It should be emphasised that although these terms appear neutral, they are not: Antiquity was the ideal, the Modern Age witnessed its rebirth, the dark ages in between had better be forgotten: they were nothing but Middle Ages. A contemporary of Cellarius, the poet Jean Racine wrote to his son about a great French cathedral: "Elle est grande, mais un peu barbare."[7] The style in which the medieval cathedrals had been built made Racine and his contemporaries shudder. They called the style 'Gothic' because they supposed that the Goths, who had destroyed Rome and its civilisation had invented it. The aversion to the Middle Ages and the idolisation of classical Antiquity is almost palpable in Goethe's account of his visit to Assisi in October 1786. When entering the town he looked only for a brief moment *mit Abneigung* at the church of San Francesco and then went on as quickly as possible to the church of *S. Maria sopra Minerva* at the *Piazza del Comune*, in whose façade four columns of a Roman temple were preserved. It takes Goethe several pages to describe his emotions on seeing these remnants of the glorious classical past. When he left the city: "blickte mich die liebliche Minerva noch einmal sehr freundlich und tröstend an, dann schaute ich links auf den tristen Dom des heiligen Franziskus und wollte meinen Weg verfolgen".[8] In the eighteenth century, the reputation of the Middle Ages reached its nadir; sad and barbaric—that was all that could be said about it, an era of oppression and of clerical tyranny that was now exposed by enlightened *philosophes*. The revolutionaries of 1789 carried the ideas of the philosophers into the arena of practical politics; they finished off the remains of feudalism, executed the Most Christian King and

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[6] Mertens, 'Mittelalterbilder', 46.

[7] F. van der Meer, *Geschiedenis van een kathedraal* [=History of a Cathedral] (Utrecht and Antwerp, 1961[4]), 65.

[8] J. W. von Goethe, *Italienische Reise* (Hamburger Ausgabe), ed. H. von Einem (Munich, 1992), 116 en 119.

destroyed the privileged position of the Church. The Middle Ages were finally over and could be forgotten.

However, the bloodthirstiness of the French Revolution and the tyranny of Napoleon made quite clear to the next generation that freedom and equality were only to be had at an extremely high, probably far too high a price. Equality often led to chaos, and too much freedom turned people into beasts, such was the conclusion of the generation that grew up after 1800. The influential political philosopher, Joseph de Maistre, thought that the cruelties of the Revolution clearly showed that the only way to guarantee order and peace was obedience to an authority not based on reason but drawing its legitimacy from God. Only thus could man's primitive instincts be reduced to acceptable levels. The only person who had such authority, according to De Maistre, was the Pope.[9] What was needed, therefore, was a restoration of the authority of the Roman Pontiff, just as it had been in the Middle Ages. De Maistre was not the only one who began to look back nostalgically to the Middle Ages as a period of social, political and religious integration; a period when a clear, hierarchical authority ruled the relationships between all ranks of society; a period when the Church had stood above all parties and had played an intermediary and conciliatory role. Had not the Popes, in those days, been the mediators in conflicts between the secular princes? Had not the monasteries always been a refuge for people threatened by violence? Should it not be so again? The young German poet Novalis had prophesied in 1799: "Blood will stream over Europe until the nations become aware of their extreme madness, a madness that imprisons them, and, touched and calmed by sacred music, they move, in colourful fusion, to previous altars . . . Only religion can awaken Europe, assure the existence of the nations and install Christianity in its old peace-making function with a new glory visible on earth...."[10]

Moreover, the young generation of 1800 was no longer interested in

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[9] I. Berlin, 'Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism', *The New York Review of Books*, 37 (1990), no 14, 61-62, en no 15, 55-56.

[10] Novalis (Fr. von Hardenberg), 'Christenheit oder Europa', in: *Schriften, 3: Das philosophische Werk II*, ed. R. Samuel (Darmstadt, 1968), 523: 'Es wird solange Blut über Europa strömen bis die Nationen ihren fürchterlichen Wahnsinn gewahrwerden, der sie im Kreise herumtreibt und von heiliger Musik getroffen und besänftigt zu ehemaligen Altären in bunter Vermischung treten ... Nur die Religion kann Europa wieder aufwecken und die Völker sichern, und die Christenheit mit neuer Herrlichkeit sichtbar auf Erden in ihr altes friedenstiftendes Amt installiren'.

the delights of reason and enlightened philosophy. What they wanted was emotion and mystical passion, to let their feelings flow freely: "Il n'est rien de beau, de doux, de grand dans la vie, que les choses mystérieuses," said Chateaubriand in 1802, when defending the genius of Christianity against the enlightened citizens of the eighteenth century.[11] Nowhere, many thought, had mystical passion been greater than in the rituals and traditions of medieval man. They had not yet learned to conceal their emotion and their desire of the supernatural. The once so despicable Gothic cathedrals now seemed to be the perfect expression of deep feeling. They were dark churches with high vaults disappearing into infinity; the language in which the sacred mysteries were celebrated was incomprehensible and the ceremonies conducted by the priests had not changed since time immemorial. They were no longer seen as the sad remains of a superstitious age, but as vessels of the deepest feelings and emotions. Romanticism and Restoration restored the Middle Ages to such popularity in the first half of the nineteenth century that in several places where the remains of those days had disappeared they were reinvented. However, the source of both contempt and admiration remained the same during all the changes in appreciation: the thousand years from 500 to 1500 AD were considered as a homogeneous epoch, the middle period, between Ancient and Modern History. Only in this century did this self-evident category become a problem.

First, doubts arose whether the period between 500-1500 had been so harmonious and hierarchical as the romanticists had thought. It looked as if the medieval world had, in fact, been an underdeveloped, primitive society.[12] To recall just one simple fact that is often overlooked: connections were extremely bad, and communications beyond the village border were often difficult, if not altogether impossible. In such circumstances it was impossible that such a thing as a hierarchically ordered society in which every person took the place assigned to him by Divine Providence, could ever have existed. The fact was that there had been many small, localized societies, each with its own laws and customs. Although moving treatises were written, during the Middle Ages and afterwards, about the sacred authority of the Church and of the King, there was hardly any effective central authority at all.

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[11] F.-R. de Chateaubriand, *Génie du christianisme*, ed. P. Reboul (2 dln,. Paris, 1966), i. 60.

[12] The introduction to Jacques Le Goff, *La civilisation de l'occident médiévale* (Paris, 1977[4]), 13-24 is programmatical in this respect.

Anarchy was the rule, order was an exception. To name but one example: the Investiture Contest was not merely a conflict between the Emperor and the Pope but it was just as much part of a difficult search for some order in a chaotic society. The fact that in this struggle the powers of ecclesiastical and secular authority were delimited, has proved important later, but it was perhaps not the most fundamental issue at the time. Another feature of medieval society, deeply admired by our nineteenth century ancestors, was the clear-cut division of political power and social function reflected in the three orders of society: the clergy, the nobility and the peasantry. This, too, turned out to be, on closer inspection, more a blueprint for an ideal society than a description of reality.[13] It was desire for order that inspired such visions; the reality was much more unruly and chaotic.

The reputation of the medieval Church was never higher than in the nineteenth century. Standing high above all tribes and nations, the Church was considered the one great institution that united all and everyone in harmony and peace. To quote Novalis once again: "This powerful peace-making community tried assiduously to make people share in its beautiful faith... Princes submitted their controversies to the father of Christendom, they laid their crowns and glory willingly at his feet ... How beneficent, how humane this government, this institution was, is shown by the remarkable upsurge of all other human potentialities, by the harmonious development of all talents, by the enormous results achieved by individuals in all branches of science and arts and by the flourishing trade in all kinds of ecclesiastical and secular goods."[14] Twentieth century scholars have shown that here, too, Novalis had been dreaming beautiful dreams and had not bothered too much with reality. Medieval society was not so soaked in Christian faith as was thought a hundred years ago.

The French historian, Paul Alphandéry, was perhaps the first to ask

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[13] Georges Duby, *The Three Orders; Feudal Society Imagined* (Chicago and London, 1980).

[14] Novalis, 'Christenheit oder Europa', 508-09: "Aemsig suchte, diese mächtige friedenstiftende Gesellschaft, alle Menschen dieses schönen Glaubens theilhaftig zu machen ... Fürsten legten ihre Streitigkeiten dem Vater der Christenheit vor, willig ihm ihre Kronen und ihre Herrlichkeit zu Füssen ...Wie wohltätig, wie angemessen, der innern Natur des Menschen, diese Regierung, diese Einrichtung war, zeigte das gewaltige Emporstreben, aller andern menschlichen Kräfte, die harmonische Entwicklung aller Anlagen; die ungeheure Höhe, die einzelne Menschen in allen Fächern der Wissenschaften des Lebens und der Künste erreichten und der überall blühende Handelsverkehr mit geistigen und irdischen Waren".

questions about medieval Christianity. In a pioneering study on the Crusades he claimed that there had been not one but two Crusades: that of the knights despatched by the Pope and blessed by the Church on the one hand, and on the other hand that of the people. Charismatic preachers, such as Peter the Hermit had stirred up the people and, in ominous, bloodthirsty and apocalyptic visions, had persuaded them to leave hearth and home and go to Jerusalem to witness the end of the world. To bring the end closer they killed all the 'enemies' of Christ that they met on their way—the Jews in Europe, the Muslims in Asia Minor and often even their fellow Christians.[15] Here, a primitive religiosity was uncovered, which had little to do with the pious ideals of nineteenth century historians. A later generation of French historians applied this division in elite and popular piety to the whole of medieval Christianity. They distinguished between religion as preached and, therefore, written down and preserved in our sources, and religion as experienced in reality. Although the latter was admittedly very difficult to trace, historians were now so fortunate that they could borrow models from cultural anthropology. They made the reconstruction of the lost world of popular faith which hardly appeared in written sources a real possibility.[16] Some historians even went so far as to say that these reconstructed forms of popular religiosity were barely Christian at all, that paganism had lived on far more powerfully than had always been believed.[17] The true Christianization of Europe probably had not taken place before the sixteenth century when the men at the top started fighting each other and desperately needed the support of the populace to strengthen their position.[18] There were protests against these extreme positions from English and American historians in particular, who pointed out some glaring methodical weaknesses of this kind of history. Because popular religiosity has left so few traces it is virtually impossible to verify whether religious forms that deviated from the official norms had existed at all and what they had looked

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[15] P. Alphandéry, *La chrétienté et l'idée de croisade*, ed. A. Dupront (2 vols., Paris, 1954-59).

[16] An important explanation of this method is given by A Dupront, 'Anthropologie religieuse', in: Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora, *Faire de l'histoire* (3 vols, Paris, 1974), ii.105-136. See by the same author *Du Sacré* (Paris, 1987), 419-537.

[17] See eg. the contributions in L. Milis (ed), *De heidense Middeleeuwen* [=The Pagan Middle Ages], Belgisch historisch instituut te Rome, Bibliotheek, 32 (Brussels and Rome, 1991).

[18] This is the thesis of Jean Delumeau, *Le catholicisme entre Luther et Voltaire*, Nouvelle Clio, 30bis (Paris, 1979).

like. Moreover it is now an established fact that even the strangest religious folklore was influenced, if not established, by Christianity.[19] What remains is that Christianity in the Middle Ages was very varied, that it was poorly regulated by the Church authorities and that there was not one, homogeneous, Christian society under the guidance of the Pope. Such a Christian society was a dream of nineteenth century Catholics about the future, which had coloured their view of the past.[20]

However, it was not only the harmonious and Christian character of the Middle Ages that became a subject of discussion in the twentieth century. For the first time, historians began to wonder whether the period between 500–1500 was as homogeneous as had always been assumed. There had always been two indications that something was wrong with this periodization. First, there has never been any agreement about the dates of the beginning and the end of the Middle Ages. The conversion of the Emperor Constantine (312) or the fall of the Western Empire (476) were the usual dates named for the beginning of the Middle Ages, the discovery of America (1492) or the beginning of the Reformation (1517) for the end. But according to some the accession of the Emperor Diocletian to the throne (284) had marked the end of the last Republican traditions of ancient Rome. His administrative reforms, and his emphasis on the divine character of the imperial monarchy were really the beginning of a new era, the Middle Ages.[21] The Belgian historian, Henri Pirenne, thought that the Middle Ages began around 700 when due to the Muslim conquest of the southern basin of the Mediterranean trade ceased and Northern Europe was reduced to an agrarian economy.[22]

There is just as much disagreement over the end of the Middle Ages. Some say that the coronation of Petrarch as poet-laureate in 1341 was the end of the Middle Ages. Recently, there have been several

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[19] John van Engen, 'The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem', in: *American Historical Review*, 92 (1986), 519-552.

[20] P. Raedts. 'De christelijke middeleeuwen als mythe: ontstaan en gebruik van een constructie uit de negentiende eeuw' [=The Myth of the Christian Middle Ages: the origin and use of a nineteenth century construction], in: *Tijdschrift voor theologie*, 30 (1990), 146-158.

[21] This was the starting point of the popular text-book by S. Painter, *A History of the Middle Ages, 284-1500* (London, 1953), which was later weakened in the editions revised by B. Tierney.

[22] For a short explantion of this thesis, with comments, cf Henri Pirenne, *Histoire économique et sociale du Moyen Age*, ed. H. van Werveke (Paris, 1969), 1-6, 197-200.

historians who have pointed out that most basic social, political, economical and religious structures, established in the twelfth century, did not change until the end of the eighteenth century. The sixteenth century may have been a period of quantitative growth but it cannot be considered as the beginning of a new era: in other words, the Middle Ages continued until about 1800. That is what the French call *le long Moyen Âge.*[23]

There is another indication, besides the periodization, that the classical concept 'Middle Ages' should perhaps be looked at again. It is striking that most of the great nineteenth century editions of medieval sources run into trouble when they approach the year 1200. Migne, in his *Patrologia latina,* chooses the easier way out and finishes with the writings of Pope Innocent III (1198 - 1216). The editions of the *Monumenta Germaniae historica* become very selective after 1200, whereas for the period till then they are practically complete. What may be happening is that after 1200 there is simply too much material to publish everything. It means that Europe was about to become a literate society: the written word was replacing memory.[24] Such a transition from oral to literate is such a fundamental change that the question must be asked whether it is possible any longer to lump together the period before and after that transition under the name of 'Middle Ages'.

One of the first to draw attention to this crucial period was the American historian Charles Homer Haskins. In 1928 he published a study on cultural and intellectual life in the twelfth century, programmatically entitled *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century.* In this book, Haskins showed that the period between 1000–1200 was a period of unprecedented literary activity and originality that was not in any way inferior to the real Renaissance but formed the foundation of it.[25] It was a pity that Haskins had to justify his interest in twelfth century culture by naming it 'Renaissance' thus tacitly confirming that the age of humanism remained the norm of all true civilization. He underestimated the originality of the period, but perhaps in 1928 he could not have approached it differently, because what he was writing

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[23] Jacques Le Goff, *Pour un autre Moyen Age; Temps, travail et culture en Occident* (Paris, 1977), 10-11.

[24] M. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record, England 1066-1307* (Oxford, 1993^2), 1-2 estimates that there were 2000 charters issued in England before 1066, while for the 13th century alone there are a few million.

[25] Norman Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages. The Lives, Works and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1991), 182-183.

was, after all, a history of twelfth century culture, and that made a comparison with the Renaissance of the sixteenth century probably unavoidable. Only when historians such as Marc Bloch, Georges Duby and Richard Southern showed that the intellectual and cultural revival of the twelfth century was not an isolated phenomenon but that the revival could only be understood within a much broader framework, historians began to realize the full extent of the originality of this period.[26]

Two facts are fundamental to the unprecedented upsurge of Europe during that time. First, after 950 the invasions by new tribes, which had threatened Europe since the third century, suddenly ceased or could be held in check. The Normans settled down in Normandy and Northern England, the Hungarians were decisively defeated by the German king, Otto I, at the Lechfeld near Augsburg in 955, and the Saracen pirates could be kept under the thumb by the rapidly growing city republics of Venice, Genoa, Pisa and Amalfi. Secondly, a veritable population explosion took place between 950 and 1300 and a rate of growth was reached that was not achieved again before the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[27] What is more important, thanks to the revolution in agricultural technology it was possible to feed the growing population and even to accelerate its growth.[28] For the first time in hundreds of years, such surpluses were harvested that it became possible to feed people who were not directly involved in agriculture, but in trades and crafts. Thus the expansion of cities as centres of economic activity was made possible and the primitive barter system gave way to an economy based on money.

The disadvantage of the traditional periodization is that, as we have already seen, the period between 500 and 1500 appears as a static whole, a homogeneous period without much development. Because of this, the period between 1000 and 1300, so important to subsequent European history, in fact disappears. Therefore, I would like to propose a completely different periodization of European history: Antiquity until 1000, the Middle Ages between 1000 and 1800 and the Modern Age from 1800. However revolutionary this periodization may seem, it

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[26] M. Bloch, *Les caractères originaux de l'histoire rurale française* (1931) and his *La société féodale* (1940), R.W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (1953), and G. Duby *La société aux XIe et XIIe siècles dans la région maconnaise* (1953), are seminal works.

[27] Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe. Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change 950-1350* (London, 1993), 107-111.

[28] Lynn White jr., *Medieval Technology and Social Change* (Oxford, 1962).

is not more than drawing conclusions from the results of historical scholarship from the last forty years. It has already been mentioned that historians have recently begun to realize that essential living conditions and essential social and political structures remained almost the same between 1100 and 1850. Such historians as Peter Brown and Patrick Geary have proved that there were many structural similarities between late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages and that ideas such as 'The Fall of Rome' and 'The Barbarian Invasions' are superfluous. Reading their work one can seriously question whether early medieval society was not a late offshoot from the Roman Empire rather than the beginning of a new era in European history.[29] With the help of a few important developments, I want to prove the plausibility of my guess that we have to look at the eleventh and nineteenth centuries to find the beginning of a new era in European history and not at the sixth and sixteenth centuries.

Partly because of the growing influence of cultural anthropology on historiography, which has already been mentioned, it is now an established fact among historians that one of the most fundamental distinctions between cultures is whether they are based on literacy or on oral tradition. If this criterion is being used it is evident that, before the year 1000, European culture was overwhelmingly oral.[30] The triumph of literacy began in the eleventh century. Then, for the first time, groups came into existence for whom written documents were essential to build their community. Brian Stock invented for them the term 'textual communities'.[31] Characteristic of this type of community was that, although texts were important, the reading and interpretation of the text remained the prerogative of a small elite. Simultaneously the number of schools grew quickly, and the university arose as a completely new form of education. The style and production of books also changed. Books were no longer produced as precious jewels or sacred objects, which had been worked on for years and were extremely

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[29] Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (London, 1970) and various essays in his *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (London, 1982); Patrick Geary, *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* (New York and Oxford, 1988).

[30] I do not wish to enter here into the discussion between Michael Richter, *The oral tradition in the Middle Ages*, Typologie des sources du Moyen Âge occidental, 71 (Turnhout, 1994) and Rosamund MacKitterick, *The Carolingians and the Written Word* (Cambridge, 1989) about the extent of orality of early mediaeval society; the contrast with the late Middle Ages remains significant.

[31] Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy; Written language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, 1983), 88-240.

rare anyway. New methods were invented to accelerate the production and distribution of books. In university cities booksellers went as far as to take books apart so that they could let out the quires for copying purposes: in this way, twenty or more copies could be made simultaneously, instead of one, as in Carolingian monasteries.[32] The invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century accelerated this process but it was not a true innovation. That came about only in the nineteenth century when education became obligatory. Then, for the first time in history, everyone had access to writing, and literacy ceased to be the preserve of the elite.

Economic and social changes in the countryside were also much later than is generally assumed. Pierre Bonassie has shown that the late-antique *latifundia*, based on slave labour, remained characteristic of rural life in the early Middle Ages and that it was not until the eleventh century that one can one speak of feudal relations.[33] Simultaneously te so-called rise of the cities began, an expression that must be properly understood. There were cities before 1100, although they were much smaller than in Roman times, but they were parasites on the land and did not serve as economic stimuli. The city as a centre of trade and cottage industry was a creation of the eleventh century. The structure of economic life that was created then did not change much until the nineteenth century: despite a considerable volume of trade it remained an economy of shortage. Most of the population remained involved in agriculture, but in the cities new sources of trade and wealth were opened up. This only ended when in the nineteenth century European countries started to industrialize and agriculture as the foremost source of income disappeared. It was not until then that industry and trade employed the bulk of the working population, and the economy of shortages yielded to an economy of abundance.

Perhaps even more important for the future of Europe was the change in mentality that, in part, was a consequence of the growth of literacy and wealth, but also had a dynamic of its own. The whole

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[32] J. Destrez, *La Pecia dans les manuscrits universitaires du XIIIe et XIVe siècle* (Paris, 1935) and A. Pollard, 'The *Pecia* System in the Medieval Universities', in: M. Parkes and A. Watson (ed.), *Medieval Scribes, Manuscripts and Libraries* (London, 1978), 145-61.

[33] Pierre Bonassie, 'Survie et expression du régime esclavagiste dans l'Occident du haut Moyen-Age', in: *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale*, 28 (1985), 307-43. His conclusions are confirmed for the Maconnais in G. Bois, *The Transformations of the Year One Thousand. The Village of Lournand from Antiquity to Feudalism* (Manchester, 1992).

approach to life became much more rational in the eleventh century. A generation arose which was convinced that man could take fate into his own hands and that people were not hopelessly dependent on cosmic powers. The proper use of reason should make it possible to solve most problems and to get to the bottom of reality.[34] For centuries monks had faithfully transcribed Aristotle's works on logic and then put them on the shelf, but now scholars poured over them for the first time, and found them to be a great help to penetrate the deep recesses of the human mind. Scholars such as Anselm and Abelard were convinced that if they, by means of logic, could lay bare the structures of language then they could also trace the fundamental structures of reality itself. It was their infectious optimism that made the twelfth and thirteenth centuries into one of the most rationalist periods in European history. It was a quest for understanding that was always conducted, of course, within the framework of Christianity, but the tenets of faith were critically analyzed and questioned in a manner perfectly described by Bernard of Clairvaux, who hated this inquisitiveness, as *paratus de omnibus reddere rationem, etiam quae sunt supra rationem.*[35] At the outset Western scholars were, to a large extent, dependent on what they learnt from Arab and Jewish scholars, but the remarkable fact is that, while in the Jewish-Arabic environment this critical attitude ended with Averroes (1126–1198) and Maimonides (1135–1204), it developed in Christian Western Europe and eventually managed to free itself completely from the shackles of religious faith altogether.

This brings me to my last and most important point. The Church, too, came to life again after the year 1000. Peter Brown speaks of the "redrawing of the boundaries between the sacred and the profane" as the most dramatic development of the eleventh century.[36] Perhaps one should say that in the eleventh century the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural were not redrawn, they were being drawn for the first time. Before the year 1000, the profane and the sacred were interwoven to such an extent that no-one could distinguish between them: kings were holy men, decked out with relics, bishops

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[34] A. Murray, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1978), 111: 'There now grew the realization that man could control his environment through his mind'. The consequences for theology are discussed by M.-D. Chenu, *La théologie au XIIe siècle* (Paris, 1976[3]).

[35] Bernardus, *Epistolae,* CXC in: Migne, *PL,* 182, 1055.

[36] Peter Brown, 'Society and the Supernatural: a Medieval Change', in: *Society and the Holy,* 305.

led armies into battle.[37] Christianity was organized as God's kingdom on earth, where the king-emperor functioned as high priest and Christ's Vicar, a form of Church organisation still to be found in the Christian East. When, however, in the eleventh century the whole of Western society began to reorganise and try for a more clear-cut division of power, the traditional relation of Church and society was suddenly experienced, particularly by the clergy, as a corruption of the original purity of the Church. The holy must be separated from the profane. That priests were married now seemed unbearable, because it involved them too much in matters of this world and made them unfit to serve at the altar. Priests ought to stay clear of the things of this world. They ought to remain celibate and their appointment should not be in the hands of the laity. The reformers wanted a priesthood that behaved as a professional caste, isolated from the world, coopting themselves and possessing the monopoly of the holy, so that they could guide the world to its eternal destiny.[38] The reformers achieved their purpose: the Western Church developed into a powerful, autonomous and independent organization around the Pope in Rome, an organization with a very fine distinction between clergy and laity. The latter included the emperor and all kings, from now on considered nothing more than secular princes. Strange as it may sound, it was that high ideal of purity and independence that ensured that in the West, not just the Church but also the state in subsequent centuries could develop into an autonomous organization with its own aims. So the fruitful and unique dualism between power and ideology came into existence that became a basic condition for the establishment of civil freedom in Western Europe. Vargas Llosa is correct when he points out that the duality of religion and power, of Church and state is a unique feature of Western culture, but he places its origin four centuries too late.

The nineteenth century marks the next break. Although between 1100 and 1800 Church and state were sharply distinguished, everyone

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[37] A nice example is the life of Brun of Cologne (925-965 AD), archbishop and governor, as described by his biographer Ruotger, in: H. Kallfelz (ed.), *Lebensbeschreibungen einiger Bischöfe des 10-12. Jahrhunderts*, Freiherr vom Stein Gedächtnis Ausgabe, Ausgewählte Quellen zur deutschen Geschichte des Mittelalters, 22 (Darmstadt, 1986^2).

[38] J. Laudage, *Priesterbild un Reformpapsttum im 11. Jahrhundert* (Cologne and Vienna, 1984). An anthropological interpretation of this search for purity, strongly based on the work of Mary Douglas, is given by R. I. Moore, 'Family, Community and Cult on the Eve of the Gregorian Reformation', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th Series, 30 (1980), 49-69.

was convinced that they needed each other, because the Church was essential to the coherence and general well-being of civil society. The reformers of the sixteenth century may have cancelled their obedience to the Pope, but it was taken for granted by them, just as much as by Catholics, that, in one state, only one Church can exist. If not, the unity of the whole of society would come under grave threat. The only difference was that princes from now on were free to choose between Catholics, Lutherans and Calvinists. Not until the nineteenth century Church and state were separated completely in most Christian countries. The Church was no longer considered a public corporation but a private organization that had no connexion with the state. The principle that only one Church could exist in one state was abandoned; the state had become so powerful and independent that for its internal coherence it no longer needed religion.

The drawing of boundaries between the sacred and the profane in the eleventh century had not only enormous consequences for the organization of the ecclesiastical and political structure of Western Europe, but it also signified a radical change in Christian piety. In the early mediaeval world everything was penetrated by holiness; religious practices had a ritual and collective character. Christian piety was primarily liturgical, hence a strong emphasis was laid on the mediators of holiness and the executors of the ritual, the priests.[39] Even procedures that we see as entirely secular, such as trials, were surrounded by collective rituals. The verdict often was the result of an ordeal by fire or battle, the assumption being that God would indicate the guilty party. After 1100 criticism of this practice mounted fast, it now looked like a profanation rather than an act of faith. Twelfth century canonists criticized these court practices as an abuse, a travesty of orderly court procedures, a criticism that in the 13th century led to an ecclesiastical prohibition of this type of trial.[40] Since court procedures were a thing of this world, they had to be carried out by means of this world and no appeal to supernatural authority was necessary. It is another example of a boundary drawn between the profane and the

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[39] A. Angenendt, 'Religiosität und Theologie. Ein spannungsreiches Verhältnis im Mittelalter', in: *Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft*, 1978/79, 28-55. See also his *Das Frühmittelalter. Die abendländische Christenheit von 400 bis 900* (Stuttgart, 1990), passim.

[40] Brown, 'Society and the Supernatural' fully considers the role of trial by ordeal in society. His viewpoint was criticized by R. Bartlett, *Trial by Fire and Water. The Medieval Judicial Ordeal* (Oxford, 1986), who showed that the practice of trial by ordeal lasted much longer than Brown had assumed.

sacred, between natural and supernatural, a word that, in fact, was then used for the first time in theology.

Simultaneously we see signs of a growing disappointment with collective rituals and an aspiration to a more individual expression of faith.[41] When young Anselm, around 1050, was searching for his vocation in life, he turned his back on the monastery of Cluny because too much time was spent there on liturgy and there was not enough opportunity for personal prayer. Typical of that time, too, was the phenomenon of the *Wanderprediger*, travelling preachers, not attached to a monastery, who often formed groups which practiced an intensive form of Christian life.[42] Many of these groups were the prototypes of Stock's *textual communities*. Their religious practices were not based, as in the old monasteries, on a sumptuous liturgy and elaborate rituals but on Bible texts, interpreted by their charismatic leader.

During the twelfth century, this mentality penetrated the whole Church. The old rituals were not replaced, but complemented with a variety of new devotions, which were much more personal and emotional. Priests from now on could not just be executors of an objective ritual, they were expected to take care of their flock, form their consciences, and guide them, each individually, on their way to God. Preaching, personal confession of sins, and catechism were the new pastoral strategies, a development that was confirmed in the decrees issued by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Bishops such as Robert Grosseteste of Lincoln seriously tried to carry out these decrees in their dioceses. It was bishop Grosseteste's custom to use visitations to instruct the clergy and the laity. In each parish he followed the same procedure: while the bishop instructed the clergy, Franciscan friars, who accompanied him on these journeys, gathered the people in church, where they gave catechism classes and heard confessions.

The development of a more individual piety had a second consequence, namely that, for many, the mediating role of priests became increasingly problematic. In the eleventh century the first rumours were heard about preachers who proclaimed that the Gospel alone was

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41 This change of mentality attracted much attention,especially in English historiography, under the name of Mediaeval humanism, through the works of, amongst others, R. W. Southern, *Medieval Humanism and Other Studies* (Oxford, 1970) and C. Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual 1050-1200* (London, 1972). Their arguments were criticized by C. W. Bynum, *Jesus as Mother. Studies of the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1982), 82-109.

42 Still unsurpassed is the brilliant study by H. Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter* (Berlin, 1970^2).

sufficient for salvation and that priests were not needed for the explanation of the simplicity of God's Word. Quite soon these occasional doubts developed into a common distrust of the clergy, which grew stronger as the influence of the clergy on the life of believers increased because of more intensive pastoral care.[43] In other words, from the twelfth century there always was an undercurrent, a suspicion that the mediating role of the Church and of its priests was perhaps not as necessary as the clergy itself maintained. Was the whole machine really necessary? It was a question that, once asked, did not go away. However, as long as secular authorities helped the Church in suppressing these dissenting voices, not much could happen. Real problems came when in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, first in Bohemia and later in the rest of the Empire, several princes and other secular authorities began to associate themselves with this fundamental criticism. It was then that this undercurrent came to the surface and led to what we now call the Reformation.

It has been my purpose to prove the inherent weaknesses of traditional periodization. It is my opinion that it focuses attention on the wrong periods, on the sixth and on the sixteenth centuries, on the so-called Fall of Rome and on the Renaissance, as though these were the times of fundamental change in Western Europe. What we need is a periodization that marks the truly revolutionary periods of the High Middle Ages and of the early nineteenth century. It was in those two crucial periods that European history took a decisive turn, for the better, I think. So, if we do not want to give up the convenient division of time in ancient, middle and modern, which lies so deep in the structure of our collective memory, then we must change the traditional dates and assume that classical Antiquity continued until 1000 AD, the Middle Ages until 1800 AD, and that the Modern Age started with the political and economic turmoil in France and England around 1800 AD. The question whether we now see the end of that era I leave to a future generation to decide.

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[43] In particular R. I. Moore, *The Origins of European Dissent* (London, 1977) demonstrated that questioning the role of the clergy is at the root of all mediaeval heresy. The latest state of affairs can be seen in M. Lambert, *Medieval Heresy: Popular Movements from the Gregorian Reform to the Reformation* (Oxford, 1992^2).